

Bob Dylan
"Love And Theft"
Columbia

by Peter Stone Brown

*"Some day everything's gonna be different
When I paint my masterpiece"*

—Bob Dylan, 1971

The thing about Bob Dylan all along the line of his four-decade career is just when you think you've got him pegged he goes and does something different. He came to Greenwich Village, riding the Bound For Glory ghost train of Woody Guthrie telling taller than tall tales of places he'd never been, blues singers he'd never met, running the fairways of the carnival that was only in his mind, turning blues into gospel, gospel into blues, old ballads into whooping Elvis meets Chaplin comedy. A baby-faced kid haunted by death, with a voice that managed to sound like every singer he ever heard filtered through the high school haze of being the wrong kid in the wrong Midwestern town where it was always freezing reaching for some mythical mystical place where some whiskey drinking Tennessee/Virginia fiddler winds up on the most lonesome delta crossroads under a cloudy full moon shivering with some blind phantom whiskey drinking slide guitar player while a cold wind blows in the dust from Texas and Oklahoma.

Even the people who didn't wanna admit he had something *knew* he had something and then this kid turns around and turns some old English ballad into "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and nobody had ever heard anything like that before. And so the kid becomes the great hope of the fading union waving folkies, and he churns them out, one after the other, each new one better than the one before and then he turns around and says more or less, "That ain't me babe," and more or less denies everything that came before. And before you know it he's the perfect rock and roller but he's not because those words kept coming like lightning that bolted and jolted its way into a lot of people's minds and all these people with jolted lightning bolted minds started to wonder to themselves how can this guy know exactly what I'm feeling. And before they knew it the mythical dusty hobo kid had turned into some kind of fierce walking pop art brilliant clown turning both his interviews and his concerts into some top speed Coney Island Of The Mind with the roller coasters rumbling off the rails and the Ferris wheel spinning into the sea anì¥Á17 11ð¿11111111111111ø]11

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5date. He put that voice to use at exactly one concert turning the dusty homeless Roosevelt songs of his last gone hero into some kind of eternal twilight rockabilly and vanished again. He reemerged a year later chewing gum crooning across a barricade of microphones to Johnny Cash turning one of his loveliest four-in-the-morning alone on the street songs into a boom chicka boom joke in some new deeper voice that may or may not be his real voice and it was what wasn't happening as much as what was happening that kept you fascinated.

Things kept on like this for a pretty long time with varying voices and varying results and finally he hit the road big time singing at full force shouting out the words ferociously, but it wasn't the same, and it didn't get inside you the way it once did. He vanished again, this time back to New York City. The city where steam comes out of deserted warehouse cobblestone streets and heat pipes cough in lofts and this time when he came back, he was really back. There wasn't any doubt. The songs danced down some tangled windy road, and seemed to cut across and through time and it didn't matter what or who they were about because it was that "thing" in his voice that once again went right through you and it really wasn't a case of where he'd been, but he seemed to know where you'd been.

He didn't stay away long and when he came back at the dawn of the Nation's bicentennial, he was a protest singer of all things. But wait, he isn't just that, he's a cowboy clown in mime makeup leading a vagabond troupe of lost folksingers, young rockers, folk rockers rock rockers and glam rockers, beat poets and assorted companions into snowy New England bringing the streets of Brooklyn, the Egyptian Pyramids of Mexico, to Indian Reservations, colleges and shopping mall arenas where French gypsies meet New Jersey prisoners, hard rain falls on Baltimore barmaids, and Woody Guthrie, Johnny Ace and Merle Travis danced some eight mile high this land really is your land celebration and there was no doubt the circus was in town. He tried to do it again hitting the Deep South, but it wasn't the same, it never is. It was angrier, guitars menacing, crashing lashing, the rhythms starting and stopping, the troupe of clowns turned into terrorists and it collapsed somewhere in the desert, and he stayed away for awhile.

When he returned the King was dead and he was trying to dress in the King's clothes. He was leading some topsy-turvy huge band that turned the songs inside out and upside down. Nothing was what it seemed. At the one show I saw it seemed like some other guy was on stage until he finally appeared alone to sing "It Ain't Me Babe," and then the other guy returned.

Not long after, he turned into a hell fire preacher and what everyone missed in the brimstone was it was also a full-fledged return to rock and roll. The voice was enough to make you believe and the between-song preaching

made you think he'd never sing the songs you wanted him to sing again. Then slowly a few at a time, the old songs came back and then full-force and by the end of the tour he was that sunglassed rocker wildly moving around the stage complete with the like a Rolling Stone comic organ player and then he vanished. Then he was spotted in Israel wearing a Yarmulke and tefillin and what should have been *the* album of the '80s somehow came out a bit wrong and later on everyone found out he left the best songs *off* the album.

After that, things got pretty strange. It seemed as if Bob Dylan was actually paying attention to music critics. His next album found some great and not-so-great songs buried beneath a flood of production, except for one lone solo poetic masterpiece, that almost seemed to dismiss the album in one brilliant stroke. Things continued on this roller coaster ride of occasional brilliance and the bottom dropping out for some time, with other people's band's and other people's songs and then out of the blue he took to the road, not that he'd been off it for very long. This time he had a small four-piece band, opening the shows with the one song his fans thought he'd never sing on stage, "Subterranean Homesick Blues." More songs people never thought they'd hear started appearing along with old folk songs, sometimes done as folk songs, sometimes as something else. He was revisiting his past and reinventing it. Then from New Orleans came what seemed like a real Bob Dylan album for the first time in a long time. It was powerful, deep and moody and the best songs had that way of reaching deep into your soul. True to form, he didn't stay there long and for his next album went for the hot producer of the day who brought in lots of guest stars. It could've been called nursery rhymes of the apocalypse but wasn't and no one except for the die-hards really cared either way. But he didn't get off the road though the venues and the crowds got smaller, and sometimes the performances got strange. Then Bob Dylan did a very strange thing. He put out two consecutive albums of folk songs and blues. The first was rough and raw, probably sung in one take. The second a little more focused. After the second one Bob Dylan became alive on stage again. It took a while. When he was on he was really on, when he wasn't, well he wasn't. He didn't make an album for years except for an MTV Unplugged album. There were no new songs for years. And he never got off the road. One-nighter after one-nighter across the world. Then there was word he was in the studio again for the first time in ages and the reports were interesting and then one spring day I got into my car after work and all news radio said Bob Dylan was in the hospital with a heart ailment. I was stuck in a rush hour traffic jam.

He was back on the road in a couple of months and the new album though it was written and recorded before his illness seemed haunted by death. There was no doubt that this was written by a man who knew he was going to die. The songs were mostly blues and the album sounded like an old

blues album from Memphis or Chicago and maybe everywhere in between. In all the songs he was walking either pacing the room or on deserted streets. No matter where he was, it seemed like the wrong place and there were hints there might not be any more songs to come. He said it was his first real album and all the others were blueprints, but he'd said things like that a lot of times before. The album and the heart scare reminded everyone who he was, and he dined with kings and was offered wings. As good as the album was, the real action was on the stage and his band kept changing and with each change it became better. But his voice had changed over the years, it had turned into the voice he was looking for when he first started out. The roughhewn singer on some mountain porch up some road you couldn't drive on and the haunted mystic blues man. And sometimes the voice would be shockingly strong, just the way he had this way of turning on stage and the years would melt away and he was that 25-year-old kid again. And he kept on the road and one tour would end and another would start right up. And it started to occur to the faithful, the ones who followed him for the long haul, the ones who came in along the way, and the kids who were just discovering him, usually to the shock of their peers, that he was doing what he probably wanted to do all along, be a musician playing in a band. Instead of being the great poet prophet, he'd somehow turned into a musician. And like the great blues and country singers, he just kept on playing. And he started to look the part as well, like some 19th century preacher or riverboat gambler doing a Chuck Berry dance. And different songs kept appearing. Original songs he'd never performed, old country songs, Buddy Holly songs, Muddy Waters, Johnny Cash, the Stanley Brothers, Charles Aznavour. You never knew what was gonna happen. And then true to form the new originals started changing. And somewhere along the line he started telling jokes on stage, usually one a night. Very bad, very old, corny jokes. They were only funny because he was telling them, with a totally straight face of course. And old songs kept appearing. Suddenly songs from *Nashville Skyline*, and even stranger, his one excursion into jazz, "If Dogs Run Free." And the old country songs became older and more obscure.

Now one thing that Bob Dylan has never really gotten credit for because his lyrics always seemed to take precedence over his music was that he took the roots based genres and mixed them all up. Old folk songs, rock and roll, country-western, blue grass, blues, R&B, gospel pop songs, it was all music to him. He never made any distinctions. He just did it, and others followed and as a result, people who may never have cared about bluegrass found themselves buying Stanley Brothers records or Blind Willie Johnson or George Jones and delving into the source of ballads, following the music to its beginnings.

Now another thing Bob Dylan has done throughout the years is drop little clues about where he's heading. Sometimes the last song on one album

points to the next. Sometimes it's in other ways. The clues to his absolutely brilliant new album *"Love And Theft"* were in his concerts over the past few years. The constant delving into old blues and country, the resurrection of "If Dogs Run Free," the jazz-flavored rearrangement of "Trying To Get To Heaven."

"Love And Theft" takes every kind of music Bob Dylan has ever played and brings it all back home in one power-packed punch that like the best of his work is on several levels at once. It also breaks for him new ground into old jazz, swing and pop.

Last May, when it seemed like every newspaper and magazine in the world was remarking on how the rebel rock poet of the '60s had turned 60, Bob Dylan was in a recording studio in New York City with his road band creating his most musically realized album. Always a pioneer and someone who prefers spontaneity and inspiration to perfection, Dylan albums always recorded quickly are for the most part rough and raw. If the feel is right, he'll leave in a mistake in the lyrics, a slurred line or even and out of tune guitar. Not this time. On *"Love And Theft"* there is not one misplaced note, not one sloppy arrangement.

Much of the credit has to go to Dylan's excellent band: bassist Tony Garnier, (who has worked with Dylan longer than any musician), drummer David Kemper, guitarist, Charlie Sexton and multi-instrumentalist (various guitars, violin, banjo) Larry Campbell. For most of Dylan's career, the common perception has been with good reason that the greatest band to work with Dylan has been The Band. This album proves the shadow of The Band (great as they were) is there no longer. This band, with the addition of Augie Meyers on organ moves through every genre whether straight ahead rock and roll, blues, jump, swing, and bluegrass with ease. It is a magnificent achievement! The vision is clearly Dylan's, but the band more than puts it across. Perhaps more than any previous Dylan album *"Love And Theft"* is as much about the music and *the sound and style* of the music as it is about the lyrics and the message.

At the same time it is lyrically dense and loaded with references. It's been a very long time that the words have come pouring out of Dylan in such a torrent. In fact as musical as this album is, there are few solos, and unlike his concerts no instrumental jams. It's almost as if he wanted to make sure everything he wanted to say got in.

On the printed page, the lyrics can be deceptive. You have to hear them sung. And again it is a new style of writing for Dylan. Some of the songs at first seem like jokes but then he hits you with a line that sizzles like a wire on fire and you suddenly realize things are much darker and deeper than they seem. And you never know when that sizzling line is going to appear.

There are more quotable lines on this album than any Dylan album in decades.

This is a distinctly American album and it brings to mind such past work as *The Basement Tapes* and *John Wesley Harding*, yet there is a host of characters to rival *Highway 61 Revisited*. In contrast to the walking of *Time Out Of Mind*, on this album Dylan is constantly driving. Car references abound.

And despite the limitations of his vocal range, Dylan sings with more intensity, emotion and heart and humor than he has on any album in a quarter of a century. It's as much in his phrasing and how he sings something as it is in what he's saying.

The album fades in on a rocker "Tweedle Dee And Tweedle Dum," that is reminiscent of two songs from 1965/'66, "I Wanna Be Your Lover" and "Tell Me Mama." There are references in the song from the obvious "Alice In Wonderland" to the Bible and Robert Johnson to name a few and certain lines suspiciously recall the last presidential election.

"Mississippi" is a standout on an album of standouts. This is a new version of a song recorded for *Time Out Of Mind*, and is one of the most beautiful and perfect arrangements of any Dylan song on any album. If there is any song on this album that sounds like a classic Bob Dylan song, this is it.

From there the album moves into the jump blues/wing of "Summer Days." One doesn't usually think of Bob Dylan as swinging, but this song swings like mad, and is quite possibly the fastest song he's ever done. On the surface it seems like a party song, but the lyrics slyly go deeper and sometimes comically as in this line: "She says, 'You can't repeat the past,' I say 'You can't? What do you mean you can't? Of course, you can.' " And again the last election is quite possibly referenced with this verse where the last line brings to mind the second debate:

Politician's got on his joggin' shoes,
He must be runnin' for office, got no time to lose,
Suckin' the blood out of the genius of generosity.
You been a-rollin' your eyes, you been teasin' me.

Dylan downshifts into a more mellow kind of swing on "Bye and Bye," which one can almost imagine Sinatra or perhaps Tony Bennet singing. Dylan slips in such lines as "I'm sitting on my watch so I can be on time" and "The future for me is already a thing of the past" with an apparent straight face and then turns around quotes William Blake. By the time he gets to the last verse which includes the line "I'm gonna establish my rule through civil war," you're not so sure either of the above singers would have done it.

From there Dylan goes into one of the heaviest and nastiest blues he's ever done, "Sad And Lonesome Day," with a wicked guitar riff punctuating each line. His vocal gets meaner and more ferocious with each verse building up to:

"I'm going to spare the defeated, 'cause I'm going to speak to the crowd,
I'm going to teach peace to the conquered, I'm going to tame the proud."

Then suddenly it's way back in time for one of the weirdest songs Dylan's ever done, "Floater (Too Much To Ask)" that borrows a riff from a '30s jazz tune, "Snuggled On Your Shoulder," sung by Bing Crosby among others. The setting appears to be somewhere in the south, with a lazy swinging feel, but all kinds of surprises lay in store from a sudden appearance of Romeo and Juliet to lines such as: "If you ever try to interfere with me/Or cross my path again,
You do so at the peril of your own life."

From there the sound suddenly shifts to bluegrass for "Highwater (For Charlie Patton)" another standout. Dylan's singing here is beyond incredible and again the lyrics refer to other songs from Patton's "Shake It And Break It," "Kansas City," Robert Johnson's "Dust My Broom," and the ancient ballad, "The Cuckoo." The song initially appears to be about a flood but again Dylan jumps all over the map and when it gets to this verse things change entirely:

Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew,
"You can't open up your mind, boys, to every conceivable point of view,
They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway 5"
Judge says to the High Sheriff, "I want them dead or alive,
Either one, I don't care"
High water everywhere

Again Dylan pulls an astounding change of pace into a jazz-flavored "Moonlight" with the kind of sweet vocal one wouldn't necessarily expect. The melody is unlike anything he's ever written and again the sly humor appears especially the way he sings this verse:

The clouds are turning crimson,
The leaves fall from the limbs and
The branches cast their shadows over stone;
Won't you meet me out in the moonlight alone?

Perhaps the lightest track on the album, there's an undercurrent in both his voice and the music that suggests something darker.

Just when you think Dylan's become a pop crooner he slams into the album's hardest rocker "Honest With Me." The song has a positively evil slide guitar and a vocal that grows meaner with each line. Again comic lines are interspersed with lines that slay you and the song is loaded with bizarre images where you least expect them.

Mississippi John Hurt meets Fats Waller on the next song, "Po' Boy," a country blues mixed with Dixieland that one could imagine Louis Armstrong singing. Dylan's vocal is incredibly impassioned and funny at the same time and again the use of jokes alternated with other lines such as "The Game is the same, it's just up on another level," and when Othello and Desdemona suddenly appear, it's not all that surprising, nor is the knock knock joke that ends it.

"Cry Awhile" slides back into the delta with a kind of crazy Howlin' Wolf time shift. Again the intensity in Dylan's voice, complimented by the perfect guitar work of Campbell and Sexton make this one of the funkiest tracks he's ever done highlighted by lines like: Some people they ain't human, they ain't got no heart or soul."

Saving the best for last, Dylan shifts back into modern times (sort of) with "Sugar Baby," another song that's different than anything he's done. Opening with Garnier's bowed bass against a single organ chord, this is the album's saddest and most moving song. His voice is spooky recalling the best songs of *The Basement Tapes* such as "Tears of Rage" and (the unreleased) "I'm Not There (1956)." Lines like "Every moment of existence seems like some dirty trick" contrast against the jokey lines such as "I'm living with Aunt Sally, but you know she's not really my aunt."

The beginning of the second verse, "Some of these bootleggers, they make pretty good stuff," has already caused some eyes to open wide on the Internet news group, rec.music.dylan. Is he talking about bootleggers or *bootleggers*?

"*Love And Theft*" crosses more emotional and musical territory than any album in recent memory by Dylan or anyone else. As on his best work of the past, you're never really sure whether it's him or a character talking. For years Dylan has been quite conscious of time and space in his songs and here he crosses time, and subject matter with blinding speed sometimes in a single verse or line. Virtually every topic Dylan's sung about is in this album in one way or another from love or lost love to America to God, redemption, the terrible sadness of life and the state of the world. At times he is at his most personally revealing, and there are several references to his parents (though of course sometimes it could be a character in a song). When he sings, "Some of these memories you learn to live with, some of

them you can't" there is no doubt that it's coming from some place deep inside.

That Bob Dylan could pull this album out of his bag of tricks at this time is no small achievement. Yes the Bob Dylan of another time and place could not possibly have made this album. He had to get to where he is now to do it. As a good friend of mine said after hearing it, "It's like he woke up and remembered who he is."